

THE PAPERS OF THE  
HYMN SOCIETY

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IX

*Christian Hymns  
of the First Three Centuries*

*by*

RUTH ELLIS MESSENGER, PH.D.

THE HYMN SOCIETY OF AMERICA

NEW YORK CITY

1942

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## *Christian Hymns of the First Three Centuries*

### I. INTRODUCTION

There is no part of the general field of Christian hymnology so baffling to the student or so full of difficulties as the one under consideration in this paper. Many accounts of the subject are in existence but are far from conclusive. This is due, first of all, to the unexpected scarcity of original sources. When one views the rise of Christianity from its inception to the period of the Council of Nicæa, 325, its numerical growth from a handful of original adherents to millions of followers at the time of the Edict of Milan, 313, its literary development from early scattered records to the works of the great Greek and Latin fathers, one cannot help inquiring, "What has become of their hymns?"

Another puzzling aspect of the study is the complex historical background against which the progress of Christianity appears. The peace and constructive progress of the Augustan era, in which Christianity was founded, have often been cited as factors contributing to its evolution and spread. But this is not the whole story. The civilization of that day, especially in the eastern Mediterranean lands most concerned, was largely Hellenistic, of mingled Greek and oriental features which were necessarily wrought into the fabric of the new religion. An understanding of pre-Augustan conditions, in which these diverse historical and literary trends were merged, is essential, for without it the subject is unintelligible.

A further problem which confronts the student is that of interpretation. It is well known that any general treatment of early Christianity is apt to conform to the point of view of the author. The study of hymnology, like that of other features of the early Church, is apt to be affected by the opinion of the commentator.

It is no wonder that the field has been neglected and that the accounts of it are vague, incomplete and unsatisfactory. In fact, the task of re-examining the mass of extant records of early Christianity and other relevant material, which might illuminate the subject of hymnology, seems never to

have been undertaken with this purpose in view. It is, actually, too vast a project for the casual student and certainly has not been attempted here. Our best accounts of early Christian hymnody are often subordinated to a general history of Christian hymns. This is the case with the article, entitled, *Hymnes*, by H. Leclercq, in the *Dictionnaire D'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, probably the best short account in any language, containing a section on the hymnology of the first three centuries.<sup>1</sup> Charles Stanley Phillips drew generously from this source for the first chapter of *Hymnody, Past and Present*, which is written from the liturgical standpoint.<sup>2</sup> Independent studies are rare. Among them, *Die Hymnendichtung des frühen Christentums* by Josef Kroll, a distinguished classical philologist, deserves a much wider circulation and should be translated for the benefit of English readers.<sup>3</sup>

In view of the dearth of available material in English, it has seemed timely to approach the whole subject from a new standpoint. In this study, the extant hymnic sources will be presented objectively. Groups of hymns will be used to illustrate the types current in the period. In connection with them, the related historical and literary influences will be noted.

Let us abandon at once our contemporary connotation of the word *hymn* which is derived ultimately from the hymns of Ambrose, 340-397, that is, a metrical lyric constructed in stanzas. In the pre-Ambrosian period Christian hymns were largely of the psalm type, to be chanted in rhythmic periods without rhyme. Not only should the word *hymn* be conceived in terms of ancient thought, but also the futile attempt to differentiate among psalms, hymns and canticles should be avoided. Specialists in liturgical matters testify to the confusion existing among ancient writers in the use of these words and to the uncertainty of definition which results.<sup>4</sup> It is better not to multiply difficulties but to hold fast to the actual texts which we know were used in Christian worship.

## II. OLD TESTAMENT HYMNS

At the threshold of Christianity the student crosses from the literary environment of the Old Testament into that of

<sup>1</sup> H. Leclercq, "Hymnes," *Dictionnaire D'Archéologie Chrétienne, etc.* (Paris, Letouzey, 1925), vol. 16, 2826-2928; Part I, *Hymnographie des trois premiers siècles*, 2826-2859.

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Phillips, *Hymnody, Past and Present* (London, S. P. C. K., 1937).

<sup>3</sup> J. Kroll, "Die Hymnendichtung des frühen Christentums," *Die Antike*, 2 (1926), 258-281.

<sup>4</sup> J. Mearns, *Canticles of the Christian Church* (Cambridge, Un. Press, 1914), 1; F. Cabrol, "Cantiques," *Dictionnaire D'Archéologie Chrétienne, etc.*, vol. 2 (2), 1976.

the New. But in actual practice the Hebrew psalms were never given up, and to this day are treasured in every branch of the faith. In the early centuries they formed the bulk of Christian hymnody. References to their use appear throughout the New Testament and are familiar to all. And, moreover, the influence of the Hebrew psalms upon the composition of new hymns is apparent even in the Gospels.

Keeping these important facts in mind regarding the psalms, the student may pass on to other hymnic sources in the Old Testament. Many striking lyrical passages in the Hebrew scriptures, uttered or perhaps repeated in moments of emotional fervor, were used by later worshippers to express a similar attitude toward the Divine.<sup>5</sup> Among these may be cited the Songs of Moses,

I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously (*Ex. 15: 1-19*),

Give ear, O ye heavens, and I will speak; and hear, O earth, the words of my mouth (*Deut. 32: 1-43*);

Hannah's Song of Thanksgiving,

My heart rejoiceth in the Lord (*I Sam. 2: 1-10*);

the great hymns in the Book of Isaiah,

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts (*Isa. 6: 3*),

We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks (*Isa. 26: 1-21*),

the second part of which begins,

With my soul have I desired thee in the night (*Isa. 26: 9-21*);

Jonah's Song,

I cried by reason of my affliction unto the Lord (*Jonah 2: 2-9*);

the Song of Habakkuk,

O Lord, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid (*Hab. 3: 2-19*)

The apocryphal addition to the Book of Daniel, known as the Song of the Three Holy Children, may be considered with Old Testament lyrics. Comprising sixty-seven verses, it was added to *Daniel 3: 23*, but, strictly speaking, its date, author and original language are unknown. It is probable that it is of Hebrew authorship and belongs to the first century, B. C. Its use, however, is unquestioned.<sup>6</sup> The first part,

Blessed art Thou, O Lord of our fathers,

<sup>5</sup> All biblical passages quoted in this paper are given in the *King James Version* of the English Bible.

<sup>6</sup> R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1913), vol. I, 627-629.

is the familiar *Benedictus es, Domine*; and the second part,

O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord,

is the *Benedicite, omnia opera*.

The term *canticle*, mentioned above, has been applied in a general sense to such lyrics from the Old Testament and also from the New. "In practice," says James Mearns, "it means those Songs of Holy Scripture which have been selected for ecclesiastical use and are appended to, or incorporated with, the Psalter or other parts of the Divine Office."<sup>7</sup> Both Eastern and Western Churches early made official use of the Old Testament canticles,<sup>8</sup> while the Greek Church elaborated upon them in formal metrical compositions, called *canons*, or groups of *odes* based upon an acrostic structure, a distinctive feature of Greek hymnody from the seventh century.<sup>9</sup>

It was only natural that the hymnody of the Old Testament should have exerted a marked influence upon Christian practice. The Old Testament tradition was very strong. Familiar phraseology was ready at hand for the composition of new canticles which were often mere centos from the Psalms or other portions of the Hebrew scriptures. It should be recalled that Christianity not only arose in the Semitic environment but also was for some years localized chiefly in the oriental sections of the Roman Empire, and that it was affected by oriental ideas and modes of expression. Even after Greek and Roman influences were strongly felt, hymnology retained this traditional Semitic character and pagan lyrics were held in suspicion.

### III. NEW TESTAMENT HYMNS

The transition, therefore, to the canticles of the New Testament was easy and perhaps inevitable. The *Benedictus*,

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel (*Luke 1: 68-79*),

spoken by Zacharias, the *Nunc dimittis*,

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace (*Luke 2: 29-32*),

by Simeon, and above all the *Magnificat*,

My soul doth magnify the Lord (*Luke 1: 46-55*),

<sup>7</sup> J. Mearns, *op. cit.* (see note 4), 1.

<sup>8</sup> F. Cabrol, *op. cit.* (see note 4), 1976-1977.

<sup>9</sup> J. Julian, *Dictionary of Hymnology* (London, John Murray, 1892), "Canons," 461, 463.

from the lips of the Virgin Mother, are among the most famous of early Christian hymns, which, together with the song of the angelic host at the birth of Jesus, the *Gloria in excelsis*,

Glory to God in the highest (*Luke 2: 14*),

appear within the Gospel narratives.

In the remaining portions of the New Testament other hymn fragments are found. Some of these are direct quotations from known sources.<sup>10</sup> In the *Book of Revelation* (4: 8), reference is made to the words of *Isaiah* (6: 3),

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,

a passage which has survived in the Western Church in the expanded form of the *Tersanctus*, and in the Eastern Church as the *Hymnus Angelicus*. In the same Book (*Rev. 15: 3*), the Song of Moses (*Ex. 15: 1-10*) is recalled. Some passages are considered parts of familiar pieces otherwise unknown. The quotation in the *Epistle to the Ephesians*,

Awake thou that sleepest (*Eph. 5: 14*),

may fall into this group or be considered a free rendering of certain passages in *Isaiah*.<sup>11</sup> The "faithful sayings" from the Epistles to Timothy and to Titus have also been viewed in this light.<sup>12</sup> The passage opening

For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him (*II Tim. 2: 11-13*),

possesses a marked lyrical character. The lines beginning

Who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords (*I Tim. 6: 15-16*),

reveal poetic features of a generally oriental style, framing the Old Testament content. Certain digressions in the Epistles, in which formulas of belief or of praise rise to a sure and effective climax, have the qualities of sustained hymns:

God was manifest in the flesh,  
justified in the Spirit,  
seen of angels,  
preached unto the Gentiles,  
believed on in the world  
received up into glory (*I Tim. 3: 16*),

Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth:  
who, when he was reviled, reviled not again;  
when he suffered, he threatened not;— — — (*I Peter 2: 22-25*),

<sup>10</sup> Quotations from the Psalms are not included in this paper.

<sup>11</sup> C. H. Toy, *Quotations in the New Testament* (New York, Scribners, 1884), 199-200.

<sup>12</sup> E. F. Scott, *The Pastoral Epistles* (New York, Harper, no date), 14.

above all,

Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God;

But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant— — —

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;

And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (*Philippians 2: 6-11*).

Poetic refrains are obvious in the following:

For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever (*Rom. 11: 36*),

Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end (*Eph. 3: 21*),

Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever (*I Tim. 1: 17*).

The Apostle Paul and other writers of the New Testament, who quote freely from a variety of sources, have used fragments of hymns to reinforce their teachings or with a devotional purpose. One gains from such citations a text only, or a fragment of text. Singing is not implied. The apocalyptic vision of the *Book of Revelation*, however, contains several magnificent hymns of praise which testify not alone to the form and content of the early hymn but also to the practice of worship in song. The praises of the heavenly host are mirrored in the praises of the congregation upon earth.<sup>13</sup> "And they sung a new song, saying,"

Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof (*Rev. 5: 9-10*),

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing (*Rev. 5: 12-14*),

Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever (*Rev. 7: 12*),

Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints (*Rev. 15: 3-4*),

Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth (*Rev. 19: 6*).

From the point of view of the evolution of Christian hymns, the hymns in the *Book of Revelation* are perhaps the most significant in the New Testament because they exhibit varied elements, from Judaism, from Christianity and from the mingling of the two.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> J. Kroll, *op. cit.* (see note 3), 264.

<sup>14</sup> M. Dibelius, *A Fresh Approach to the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (New York, Scribners, 1936), 247.

It is interesting to re-read the New Testament in the search for hymns, but one should remember that the field is controversial. Some commentators would suggest that the entire 13th chapter of *I Corinthians* is a hymn, beginning,

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels.<sup>15</sup>

A moderate rather than an extreme position, however, upon the identity of hymn sources in the New Testament seems more likely to be productive of a genuine appreciation of the style, subject matter and number of primitive Christian hymns.

Traces of poetic improvisation, which is so closely allied to hymnody, must be seriously considered at this point. The art of improvisation belongs to no one age or country. It happens that the Greeks had practiced it for centuries and that illustrations exist from the time of Homer. To the Hellenized orient it was familiar. "The Greeks of Cilicia and of the region about Antioch and Tarsus," as Dr. George Dwight Kellogg reminds us, "seem to have cultivated the art and become famous." He also suggests that the "gift of tongues" refers to this art and that Paul himself possessed the poetic talent in no small degree.<sup>16</sup> It is only natural to assume that, among the early Christians, certain individuals would react to the influence of heightened emotion in outbursts of poetic expression. Passages in the *Book of Acts* may refer to the use of such hymns, for example, in the case of the Gentiles at Caesarea, who "speak with tongues and magnify God" (*Acts 10: 45-46*), or the Ephesians who "spoke with tongues, and prophesied" (*Acts 19: 6*), or perhaps the disciples on the Day of Pentecost (*Acts 2: 4*). Irenæus, a second century father of the Church and bishop of Lyons, referring to the scene at Pentecost, mentions the singing of a hymn on that occasion.<sup>17</sup> The nature of improvisations is fugitive. They arise from individual inspiration and, even if expressed in familiar phrases, are not remembered or recorded by the singer or hearer. To whatever degree improvisation played a part in early Christian hymnody, to that same degree we lack corresponding literary survivals. Possibly this is one explanation of the dearth of sources which we now deplore.

<sup>15</sup> R. Reitzenstein, *Die Hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen* (Leipzig, Teubner, 1927), 3rd edition, 385.

<sup>16</sup> G. D. Kellogg, *The Ancient Art of Poetic Improvisation*, a paper read at the meeting of the Classical Association of the Atlantic States, April 26, 1940; J. Kroll, *op. cit.* (see note 3), 259.

<sup>17</sup> *Contra Hæreses*, III, xvii, 2; Migne (PG), VII, 929-930. For a recent commentator, see F. J. Foakes-Jackson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), 10-13.

On the whole, the hymnic evidence found in the New Testament points to a predominant Hebrew influence. Both in the use of psalms and other Old Testament hymns and in the phraseology of new hymns, the Christians found themselves more at home in the traditional forms of expression. Features of style, such as parallelism, uniformity and the repetition of words or word order, were not necessarily restricted to Hebrew poetry but might be found in other oriental sources—a consideration to which further attention will be given later.<sup>18</sup> Still we may assume that the influence of Judaism in form as well as subject matter was supreme.

#### IV. LITURGICAL HYMNS

Christian practice reveals a third type of Hebrew influence, the liturgical, which brought about the use of the psalms in public worship, together with other elements familiar in the synagogue. At the close of a service of this kind, made up of prayers, readings, psalms and preaching, the eucharist was celebrated. Early writings, for example, the *Apologia* of Justin Martyr, 100?–165,<sup>19</sup> the *Didache*<sup>20</sup> and the *Apostolic Constitutions*,<sup>21</sup> testify to a somewhat fixed type of worship, which, varying in details, seems to foreshadow the liturgical models of the fourth century.

Briefly stated, the *Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, is a second century treatise, the second part of which includes a ritual of baptism, fasting and the eucharist.<sup>22</sup> A series of eucharistic prayers is here recorded, beginning, *Εὐχαριστοῦμέν σοι, πάτερ ἡμῶν*,

We thank Thee, our Father,

offered at stages of the communion ritual where we approach the heart of Christian worship.<sup>23</sup> At this point, hymn and prayer origins merge. Many Christians of our own day, perhaps the majority, regard the true hymn as a prayer offered in direct address to God. Throughout the history of Christian hymns the two forms of worship have overlapped or been identical. Hymn and prayer were also associated in ancient cults, and the chorus of a Greek drama offers an

<sup>18</sup> Note the citation, *I Tim. 6: 15–16*, *supra*, p. 7, in which the repetition of the relative clause produces a stylistic effect.

<sup>19</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apologia pro Christianis*, 67; Migne (PG), VI, 430. Translation from *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York, Scribners, 1899), I, 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Didache*, xiv; Translation from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VII, 381.

<sup>21</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions*, II, lvii; Translation from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VII, 421–422.

<sup>22</sup> *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VII, 371–376; *Catholic Encyclopedia*, IV, 779f; *Encyclopedia Britannica*, eleventh edition, VII–VIII, 209f.

<sup>23</sup> *Didache*, ix; Translation from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VII, 380.

illustration of the superb proportions which this act of worship may assume. Charles Stanley Phillips, who has recently translated anew the eucharistic prayer of the *Didache*, thinks of it as not a true hymn, but a source and model of hymnody.<sup>24</sup> Improvised eucharistic prayer was interrupted by congregational refrains which provided another opportunity for the evolution of hymns. As a matter of fact, in all ages, expressions of thanksgiving, attending the celebration of the eucharist, have inspired many of the finest hymns of the faith.

The *Apostolic Constitutions* is a manual in eight books, of ecclesiastical discipline, doctrine and worship, including the *Didache*.<sup>25</sup> Dating from the fourth or fifth century, more probably the fourth, it represents the practice of an earlier period well within the scope of this study and, in the opinion of Brightman, was compiled in Antioch or its neighborhood.<sup>26</sup> Since Greek was the prevailing language in the Christian world of that day, it became the liturgical language of early Christianity for the first three centuries. Even in Rome and other large cities of Italy, Greek was used. In Italy, with these exceptions and in the western provinces, Latin was employed, finally superseding Greek as the official language of the Western Church.<sup>27</sup>

The following hymns appear in the seventh book of the *Apostolic Constitutions*:

A morning hymn, *Δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῷ, Gloria in excelsis*,  
Glory to God in the highest;<sup>28</sup>

an evening hymn, *Αἰνεῖτε παῖδες*,  
Ye children praise the Lord,<sup>29</sup>

which includes *Σοὶ πρέπει αἶνος, Te decet laus*,  
Praise becomes Thee,

and *Νῦν ἀπολύεις τὸν δοῦλόν σου, Nunc dimittis*,  
Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace;

<sup>24</sup> *Hymnody Past and Present*, 16–17.

<sup>25</sup> F. E. Brightman, *Liturgies, Eastern and Western* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1896), vol. I, *Introduction*, xvii–xxix.

<sup>26</sup> F. E. Brightman, *supra*, xxix; see also B. S. Easton, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* (Cambridge, Un. Press, 1934), 12.

<sup>27</sup> L. Eisenhofer, *Handbuch der katholischen Liturgik*, vol. I, *Allgemeine Liturgik* (Freiburg im B., Herder, 1932), 150–152.

<sup>28</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions*, VII, 47.

<sup>29</sup> *Supra*, VII, 48.

and a prayer at dinner, Εὐλογητὸς εἰ,

Thou art blessed, O Lord, who nourishest me from my youth.<sup>30</sup>

In the eighth book of the *Apostolic Constitutions* and also in the *Liturgy of St. James* we have the *Tersanctus*, Ἄγιος, ἅγιος, ἅγιος,

Holy, holy, holy.

In another part of the same *Liturgy* the *Trisagion* appears, Ὁ τρισάγιος ὕμνος,

Holy God, holy mighty, holy immortal,  
Have mercy upon us.<sup>31</sup>

An evening hymn, Φῶς ἱλαρόν, Joyful light, is mentioned by Basil in the fourth century as very old. It was sung at vespers in the Eastern Church:<sup>32</sup>

O gladsome light, O grace  
Of God the Father's face.<sup>33</sup>

Among ancient liturgical hymns the *Te deum* should be mentioned. It is attributed to Nicetas, Bishop of Remesia in Dacia, and dated from the end of the fourth century. It appears to be a combination of three distinct parts. The first thirteen verses, or parts one and two, probably originated earlier than the fourth century and may have been inspired by Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, 200–258, who wrote in terms almost identical with the phrases of this early section, used of prophets, apostles and martyrs.<sup>34</sup>

Biblical sources, especially the canticles, now appear as liturgical hymns, either in their original form or in an enlarged version.<sup>35</sup> The use of canticles, more particularly in their variations, is of supreme interest to the hymnologist, because it offers a theory of the origin of Christian hymnody apart from liturgical interpolations or from the psalms. Clement of Rome urged the Corinthians to unite in the spirit of praise as expressed in the seraphic chorus of Isaiah's vision,

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts:  
the whole earth is full of his glory,

<sup>30</sup> *Supra*, VII, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Translations from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VII, 538, 544.

<sup>32</sup> *Liber de spiritu sancto*, xxix, 73; Migne (PG), XXXII, 205. See also J. Mearns, *op. cit.* (see note 4), 16.

<sup>33</sup> Translation by Robert Bridges, *Yattendon Hymnal* (London, Oxford Un. Press, 1920), no. 88.

<sup>34</sup> R. M. Pope. "Latin Hymns of the Early Period," *Theology*, 21 (1930), 159; *Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Te deum," XIV, 468–470; C. W. Douglas, *Church Music in History and Practice* (New York, Scribners, 1937), 158–160.

<sup>35</sup> F. Cabrol, *op. cit.* (see note 4), especially Part II, *Les cantiques anciens*, 1976–1977.

associating it with the praise of the angelic ministrants, "ten thousand times ten thousand," beheld by Daniel (*Dan.* 7: 10). The same hymn had been heard in the apocalyptic mysteries of the *Book of Revelation*. Very early it was incorporated in the liturgy of the eucharist, continuing an ageless form of the praise of God from the old dispensation into the new.

The evolution of the Great Doxology from the words of the angelic song,

Glory to God in the highest,

to the *Gloria in excelsis* illustrates the expanding thought of the Church, corresponding to the growth of the Christian body within the culture of the Roman Empire. Again, the *Gloria* illustrates Hellenistic features of poetic style, bespeaking the oriental influences which had entered into Greek literature.<sup>36</sup> Note the repetition of the clauses,

We praise thee, we bless thee, we worship thee, we glorify thee, we give thanks to thee for thy great glory,

of the invocation,

O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father almighty,  
O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ;  
O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,

of the relative clause,

That takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.  
Thou that takest away the sins of the world, receive our prayer.  
Thou that sittest at the right hand of God the Father, have mercy upon us,

of the pronoun,

For thou only art holy; thou only art the Lord; thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost, art most high in the glory of God the Father.

It is quite superfluous to analyze further the values of a poetic form which has helped to make the *Gloria* one of the truly magnificent Christian hymns of all ages.<sup>37</sup>

Postponing for the present a more detailed inquiry into stylistic origins, we may regard the group of liturgical hymns here presented as a source collection of the utmost importance. It reveals not only the continuity of the Old and New Testament hymnology but also the evolution of worship in song into the early Christian era. The fact that worship

<sup>36</sup> E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Leipzig, Teubner, 1913), 276.

<sup>37</sup> Translation from *Book of Common Prayer* (Prot. Epis. Church, U. S. A.), 84. Similar effects were apparent in *I Tim.* 6: 15–16, *I Tim.* 3: 16, *I Peter* 2: 22–25, quoted above.

was chiefly liturgical in this period and hymns were therefore liturgical appears an inevitable conclusion.

## V. CONTEMPORARY PAGAN AND HERETICAL HYMNS

Christianity expanded, as we have seen, in the environment of eastern Mediterranean culture. Its original heritage was that of Judaism, but within the first century it had entered upon the conquest of the Gentile world. As that conquest proceeded and the penetration of new ideas into pagan thought continued, a corresponding reaction of paganism upon the new faith took place. With the general aspects of this phenomenon all are familiar. It is significant here only in the field of lyrical expression. The period of pagan influence in the sense of an imprint from Greek and Roman literature is also the period of impact with pagan heretical ideas derived either from current philosophies or the practices of mystery religions.

Once more the chart and compass offered by the direct extant sources are the best guides through the cross currents of the literature in our possession. Representative pagan poetry must be examined, at least of a few general types, in order to establish what influence, if any, was exerted upon contemporary Christian hymns.

Regarding the classical influence, *per se*, a large number of Greek hymns were in existence when Christianity was founded,<sup>38</sup> and Roman lyrics were appearing in that very century. Paul was obviously acquainted with the Hymn of Cleanthes, a Stoic writer of the third century, B.C., for he quoted his words on the Areopagus. The original passage to which Paul refers has been translated as follows:

Thee it is meet that mortals should invoke,  
For we Thine offspring are and sole of all  
Created things that live and move on earth  
Receive from Thee the image of the One.<sup>39</sup>

It is evident that the Christian hymns embedded in the books of the New Testament were not constructed after a classical model of this type. The influence of Old Testament poetry was too strong, the associations of paganism repellant and, moreover, the Greek poetry, familiar to the average man of that day, quite different. The older Greek hymns, such as the *Homerical Hymns*, the *Odes* of Pindar, the choruses of

<sup>38</sup> K. Keyssner, *Gottesvorstellung und Lebensauffassung in griechischen Hymnus* (Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1932). In his index Keyssner lists 72 known authors of all periods, 37 anonymous pieces (some fragments), and 22 magical formulæ or collections.

<sup>39</sup> E. H. Blakeney, *Hymn of Cleanthes* (London, S. P. C. K., 1921), 8.

Greek tragedy, were produced in the Hellenic or pre-Hellenic ages which had been followed by more than two centuries of Hellenistic culture. Dr. Edward Delavan Perry, writing of Hellenistic poetry, said, "Other forms of poetry, particularly the lyric, both the choral and the 'individual,' died out almost completely."<sup>40</sup>

There remain, then, only the extant hymns of the mystery cults. In spite of many references to the use of singing in connection with these religions, very few specimens of their hymns actually survive. The mystery religion was a sacramental religion "which stressed the approach to Deity through rite and liturgy after a severe probation and an oath pledging to secrecy."<sup>41</sup> The leading cults were those associated with Orpheus, the Magna Mater (Cybele) and Attis, Mithra, Serapis, Isis, Adonis, and especially the Eleusinian Mysteries, which flourished for twelve centuries, ending with their extinction by the Christians in 397.<sup>42</sup>

During the period under consideration in this study Isis was honored in all parts of the Græco-Roman world. An authentic hymn to Isis appears in the writings of Apuleius (b. 125), who describes a procession in honor of the goddess and gives the words of the chorus, closing,

Thy divine countenance and most holy deity I shall guard and keep forever in the secret place of my heart.

Variants of the Isis cult hymn or hymns have been preserved in inscriptions; for example, a hymn of some fifty lines from Cyme in Æolia,

I am Isis the sovereign of the whole land.<sup>43</sup>

Liturgical survivals of the cult of Mithra are almost unknown. Franz Cumont, the great student of Mithraism, quotes one hymn fragment only,

Hail bridegroom, hail thou new light!<sup>44</sup>

He is of the opinion, however, that the Manichæan song mentioned by Augustine, 354-430, affords some idea of Mithraic poetry. The song or hymn in question represents a chief divinity surrounded by twelve minor divinities,

<sup>40</sup> E. D. Perry, Preface to A. Körte, *Hellenistic Poetry*, translated by J. Hammer and M. Hadas (New York, Col. Un. Press, 1929), vii.

<sup>41</sup> S. Angus, *Religious Quests of the Græco-Roman World* (New York, Scribners, 1929), 76.

<sup>42</sup> *Supra*, 77, 86, 87.

<sup>43</sup> *Metamorphoses*, xi, 25. Translation from S. Angus, *Mystery Religions and Christianity* (New York, Scribners, 1925), 240-241. For the hymn from Cyme see P. Roussel, "Un nouvel Hymne à Isis," *Revue des Études grecques*, 42 (1929), 138.

<sup>44</sup> Cited by Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum*, 20; Migne (PL), XII, 1025; F. Cumont, *Textes et Monuments Figurés relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra* (Bruxelles, Lamertin, 1899), vol. 1, 313.



symbolizing the seasons, all clothed with floral tributes.<sup>45</sup> Cumont also suggests that hero hymns were in existence, celebrating the exploits of the gods.<sup>46</sup> The so-called *Liturgy of Mithra*, a magic formula not considered by Cumont, contains hymn fragments, one of which begins,

Lord, hail, potentate of the water,  
hail, ruler of the earth,  
hail, potentate of the spirit.<sup>47</sup>

Hippolytus, a presbyter of Rome who died in 236, in his *Refutation of all Heresies*, quotes certain hymns in praise of Attis:

Whether thou art the race of Saturn or happy Jupiter,

and

I will hymn Attis, son of Rhea.<sup>48</sup>

Here, as in so many cases, our information concerning pagan hymns is derived from an opponent, a Christian writer and defender of orthodox religion, but this circumstance in no way affects the validity of the text.

For the Orphic cult which had the longest period of influence, we possess what may be termed a hymn book containing eighty-seven hymns. It has been variously dated from the third century, B.C., to the fourth or fifth century, A.D. With a mental reservation as to the relevancy of the citations, we find that some of these hymns in praise of the gods are full of dignity, for instance,

Mother of Gods, great nurse of all, draw near,  
Divinely honored, and regard my prayer.<sup>49</sup>

So debatable is the subject of the Orphic hymns, both in respect to date and usage, that they offer little or no assistance to the student who is interested in a possible influence upon Christian hymnology.<sup>50</sup>

Sooner or later, one must turn to the land of Egypt, if one desires a complete picture of early Christian culture. The

<sup>45</sup> *Contra Faustum*, xv, 5; Migne (PL), xlii, 307.

<sup>46</sup> Cumont, *op. cit.* (see note 44), 302.

<sup>47</sup> A. Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie* (Leipzig, Teubner, 1923), 14; Translation from S. Angus, *op. cit.* (see note 43), 241.

<sup>48</sup> *Philosophumena*, V, iv; *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*, Hippolytus, vol. iii, edited by Paul Wendland (Leipzig, Hinrich, 1916), 99-100. Translation from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, V, 56-57.

<sup>49</sup> T. Taylor, *The Mystical Hymns of Orpheus* (London, Dobell and Reeves & Turner, 1896), 63.

<sup>50</sup> J. Geffcken, *Der Ausgang des griechisch-römischen Heidentums* (Heidelberg, Winter, 1929), 18; M. Hauck, *Die hymnorum Orphicorum aetate* (Dissertation, Breslau, 1911); O. Kern, *Die Herkunft des Orphischen Hymnenbuch in Carl Robert zum 8. März 1910 Genethliakon* (Berlin, Weidmann, 1910).

mystery of the Egyptian Isis, mentioned above, was one element in the background of the times, illustrative of the religious syncretism which had been fostered throughout the Ptolemaic period. The identification of the Egyptian Thot with the Greek Hermes is reflected in the Hermetic literature of which the *Poimandres* is the oldest known writing.<sup>51</sup> From this source a hymn of praise is derived:

By thy blessing my spirit is illumined,

and a thanksgiving hymn,

Holy is God, the Father of all the universe.<sup>52</sup>

Summarizing the Greek influence, both Hellenic and Græco-oriental, upon Christian hymnology, it is difficult, if not impossible, to trace any connection between the classic Greek hymns or the hymns of mystery cults, and those of the new faith. If more sources were available, a valid conclusion might be reached. At present, a tentative conclusion involves the recognition of the vigorous protest and revolt against pagan ideas revealed in contemporary prose writings, in turn evoked by the actual pressure which was exerted upon Christianity by alien cults. The twentieth century has produced an impressive literature centered about the mystery religions and the problem of their influence upon Christianity; but in the field of hymnology there have been discovered only the faintest of traces. These are wholly stylistic. Christian hymns which reveal the characteristics of the repetition of direct address, or of relative clauses or predicates, previously mentioned, illustrate poetic forms which are, in the final analysis, oriental rather than Greek.<sup>53</sup>

It is a satisfaction to the classicist, who is interested in the history of this subject, that the classical meters, ignored at this period, were destined to be revived at a later date. They were used to some extent from the fourth century. It was reserved for the court poets of the Carolingian circle of the ninth century to restore the old lyric meters. The Sapphic meter in its Horatian form not only was a favorite among medieval Latin hymn writers, but also it has found an occasional imitator in the course of the centuries even to modern times.<sup>54</sup>

While hymn sources derived from oriental cults are ex-

<sup>51</sup> R. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres* (Leipzig, Teubner, 1904), 59, 347f.

<sup>52</sup> Translations from S. Angus, *Mystery Religions and Christianity*, 241-242.

<sup>53</sup> Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, 13.

<sup>54</sup> *Ut queant laxis resonare fibris* (Paulus Diaconus, d. 799); *Herzliebster Jesu, was hast du verbrochen* (Johann Heerman, 1630); *Where is the Friend for whom I'm ever yearning* (Johann Wallin, 1779-1839).

tremely scanty, those originating in Gnosticism are much more numerous and suggestive in their relation to Christian hymnology. Gnosticism is not so much the name of a particular philosophy or definite system of belief, as it is a point of view, which sought to harmonize the speculative achievement of Greek thought with the oriental myths and with Christian teachings. The philosophical interpretation of pagan mythology was extended to Hebrew and Christian tradition. Thus, in accordance with the tenets of Neoplatonism, the primeval being has produced the universal mind and, in turn, mind has produced the soul which in contact with evil phases of matter has lost its original purity. Therefore, the soul must retrace its steps until it reaches the final stage of reunion with the origin of all being. It is easy to understand how a variety of meanings may be read into a simple statement like the above. It is also easy to understand that the possibilities of confusion arising in the first three centuries of Christian history were matters of the utmost concern to contemporary Christian writers and dogmatists. The period abounded in heresies and misunderstandings, to the discussion of which the ablest minds of the Church were devoted. Quotations from these authors furnish many of the extant hymns composed by Gnostics, either within or without the Christian fold. The range of literary excellence, of spiritual connotation and of intelligibility of subject matter in the so-called Gnostic hymns is so wide that it is difficult to evaluate them. To the modern reader they vary from the mere rigmarole to the genuinely inspiring hymn.

Perhaps the best known and certainly one of the loftiest expressions of Gnostic ideas is the *Hymn of the Soul*, which is found in the Apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*. Dating from the first half of the third century, the *Acts of Thomas* recounts the missionary preaching of the Apostle Thomas in India. While in prison, he chants this hymn, beginning,

When I was an infant child in the palace of my father.<sup>55</sup>

It has no connection with the narrative but relates in allegorical fashion the return of the soul, which has been awakened from its preoccupation with earthly matters, to the higher state of heavenly existence. Here is a theme congenial to Christian thought and orthodox in its theology when extri-

<sup>55</sup> *Acts of Thomas*, IX, 108. Translation from M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1924), 411. See also B. Pick, *The Apocryphal Acts* (Chicago, Open Court Pub. Co., 1909), 312.

cated from the popular concepts of the times.<sup>56</sup> The actual authorship of the *Hymn of the Soul*, which is found in the Syriac version of the *Acts* alone, is unknown, but it has been attributed to some disciple of the Syrian Bardesanes, a Christian Gnostic who lived in the second half of the second century.<sup>57</sup> There seems to be no doubt that Bardesanes was himself influential as a hymn writer and that he was representative of a group of poets who were beginning to employ contemporary rhythms set to melodies familiar in daily secular life.<sup>58</sup>

The *Acts of Thomas* contains a second hymn,

The damsel is the daughter of light,

a poem of oriental imagery, personifying the divine wisdom as a bride.<sup>59</sup>

The apocryphal *Acts of John*, dating from the middle of the second century, yields a third hymn, the *Hymn of Jesus*. In the Gospel narrative of the last supper, Jesus and his disciples, before going to the Mount of Olives, sing a hymn together. It is not identified but is generally believed to be a part of the *Hallel* or group of Passover Psalms, 113-118. The writer of the *Acts of John* represents Jesus as using a new hymn which opens,

Glory be to Thee, Father.

It contains a long series of antitheses, as follows:

I would be saved and I would save,  
I would be loosed and I would loose,  
I would be wounded and I would wound,  
I would be borne and I would bear, etc.

The hymn concludes,

A way am I to thee, a wayfarer.<sup>60</sup>

Variants of the *Hymn of Jesus* are extant, one of which has been preserved by Augustine, the Hymn of the Priscillianists, which came to him from a correspondent in Spain.<sup>61</sup>

Hippolytus, whose *Refutation of all Heresies* has been mentioned in another connection, discusses the Gnostic sect of the Naasenes. He quotes one of their hymns, beginning,

'The world's producing law was Primal Mind,

<sup>56</sup> According to Pick *op. cit.* (see note 55), 312, it is a Gnostic development of *Phil. 2: 5-11*.

<sup>57</sup> O. Bardenhewer, *Patrology*, translated from the 2nd edition by T. J. Shahan (Freiburg im B., Herder, 1908), 107.

<sup>58</sup> J. Kroll, *op. cit.* (see note 3), 270.

<sup>59</sup> *Acts of Thomas*, I, 6. Translation from M. R. James, *op. cit.* (see note 55), 367.

<sup>60</sup> *Acts of John*, 94, 95. Translation from M. R. James, *op. cit.* (see note 55), 228, 253.

<sup>61</sup> Augustine, *Epistula cccxxvii*; Migne (PL), xxxiii, 1034. See also Leclercq, *op. cit.* (see note 1), 2841.

in which Jesus is represented as the guide of mankind to the attainment of celestial knowledge.<sup>62</sup> The system of Valentinus, a Gnostic leader, is also discussed and a psalm of his authorship is quoted:

I behold all things suspended in air by spirit,

a didactic presentation of Gnostic thought.<sup>63</sup> It is composed in dactylic meter, affording another illustration of the adoption of popular rhythms in the hymnology of the heretical sects. A Gnostic hymn to the Highest God from a third century Coptic source may be cited:

Thou art alone the eternal and  
thou art alone the deep and  
thou art alone the unknowable, etc.<sup>64</sup>

Whatever impression may be created upon the modern mind by the perusal of Gnostic poetry, its influence was admitted by contemporary Christians and combatted by every means in their power. The Gnostic leaders, unhampered by Hebrew traditions of religious poetry, were able to make use of popular forms and popular concepts. They met the trend of the times more than halfway. Heretical groups of all varieties of opinion were using hymns as a means of expressing their beliefs and persuading possible adherents. At the opening of the fourth century, Arius appeared, the leader of the group whose theology was rejected at the Council of Nicæa, 325, and whose hymns were met and overcome by the verses of Ambrose. Such was the influence of heretical upon orthodox hymnody.

## VI. EARLY CHRISTIAN HYMNS

Turning once more to the authentic Christian hymns of the first three centuries and this time omitting those which appear in liturgical sources, we observe three distinct linguistic groups, the Syriac, the Greek and the Latin.

The most familiar of the Syriac hymns were written by Ephraem Syrus (b. 307), who strove to counteract the influence of the Gnostic poets, especially that of his countryman, Bardesanes. Strictly speaking, he belongs to the first half of the fourth century but should be considered by the student who is tracing the continuity of this subject. His hymns are metrical in the sense of having lines with a

<sup>62</sup> *Philosophumena*, v, 5; Text, *op. cit.* (see note 48), 102. Translation from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, V, 58.

<sup>63</sup> *Philosophumena*, vi, 32; Text, *op. cit.* (see note 48), 167. Translation from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, V, 91.

<sup>64</sup> E. Norden, *op. cit.* (see note 36), 69.

fixed number of syllables and strophic divisions. An Easter hymn opens thus:

Blessed be the Messiah  
Who has given us a hope  
That the dead shall rise again.

A hymn for the Lord's Day begins,

Glory be to the good  
Who hath honoured and exalted  
The first day of the week.<sup>65</sup>

It is possible that the hymns of Ephraem were influenced by the Syriac Odes of Solomon, discovered in 1909, which were produced in the first century. Whether the *Odes* themselves are of Gnostic or Christian origin cannot be definitely asserted but the probability of the latter is strong. For a full discussion of this most interesting but highly controversial topic the work of special commentators must be consulted.<sup>66</sup> The intrinsic interest of the collection demands more than a passing comment. *Ode VI* opens,

As the hand moves over the harp and the strings speak,  
So speaks in my members the Spirit of the Lord, and I speak by His love.<sup>67</sup>

*Ode IX*,

Open your ears  
And I will speak to you,  
Give me your souls,  
That I may also give you my soul.<sup>68</sup>

*Ode XXIX*,

The Lord is my hope:  
In Him I shall not be confounded  
For according to His praise He made me,  
And according to His goodness even so He gave unto me.<sup>69</sup>

*Ode XXXI*, in which Jesus speaks,

6. Come forth, ye that have been afflicted  
and receive joy
7. And possess your souls by grace;  
and take to you immortal life.
8. And they condemned me when I rose up,  
me who had not been condemned.
9. And they divided my spoil  
though nothing was due to them.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> H. Burgess, *Select Metrical Hymns and Homilies of Ephraem Syrus* (London, Blackader, 1853), 77, 83.

<sup>66</sup> J. R. Harris & A. Mingana, *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon*, vol. 1, Text; II, Translation (Manchester, Un. Press, 1916-1920), II, 69, 187-189, 197; J. R. Harris, *Odes and Psalms of Solomon* (Cambridge, Un. Press, 1909), 1-15; M. Dibelius, *op. cit.* (see note 14), 248-251; J. Kroll, *op. cit.* (see note 3), 265-268.

<sup>67</sup> Harris & Mingana, *Odes and Psalms of Solomon*, II, 232.

<sup>68</sup> *Supra*, 259.

<sup>69</sup> *Supra*, 362.

<sup>70</sup> *Supra*, 369.

Forty-two in number, the *Odes* reveal a true inspiration, novel and significant from the religious and the literary standpoint. They preserve the tradition of the Old Testament hymns, yet breathe the spiritual life of the new revelation. Their chief interest lies in the possibility that they illustrate a valid Christian poetry of a very early date. If it is true, as the editors suggest, that the *Odes* emanate from Antioch,<sup>71</sup> we have further evidence of the spirit of worship in that city with which early Christian liturgical forms are so closely associated.

The tradition of Syriac hymnody, of which these illustrations alone may be given from the early period, did not come to an end as Christianity moved westward. It was continued through thirteen centuries and is preserved in the Nestorian and other branches of the Syrian Christian Church.

Before the main stream of hymnody in the Greek language is traced, two sources from the second century will serve as an introduction. The first of these is the *Epistle to Diognetus*, by an unknown author, possibly a catechumen of the Pauline group.<sup>72</sup> It contains four selections, biblical in their phraseology, the first three of which express the redemptive mission of the Son of God:

As a king sends his son who is also a king, so sent He Him,  
He did not regard us with hatred nor thrust us away,  
He, being despised by the people.

The fourth admonishes the Christian to union with the mind of God,

Let your heart be your wisdom.<sup>73</sup>

The second source is a passage from a sermon on *The Soul and Body*, written by Melito of Sardis, a bishop and philosopher who was martyred in 170. The author pictures all creation aghast at the crucifixion of Jesus, saying,

What new mystery then is this?  
The Judge is judged and holds his peace;  
The Invisible one is seen and is not ashamed;

The Celestial is laid in the grave, and endureth!  
What new mystery is this?<sup>74</sup>

Whether admissible as a hymn or not, this passage blends, in a most striking way, oriental and Greek elements employed in the expression of Christian belief.

<sup>71</sup> *Supra*, 69.

<sup>72</sup> *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, I, 23.

<sup>73</sup> Chapters vii, ix, x, xii. Translation from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, I, 27, 28, 29, 30.

<sup>74</sup> Translation from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VIII, 756.

Authentic Greek hymnody begins with Clement of Alexandria, 170-220. He is the author of a work of instruction for catechumens, the *Pædagogus*, to which is appended a *Hymn to Christ the Savior*, ὕμνος τοῦ σωτῆρος Χριστοῦ, beginning, Στόμιον πῶλων. It is a hymn of praise and thanksgiving on the part of those newly received into the Church. Christ is addressed in the familiar oriental imagery of the guide and shepherd, but the theme is rendered in a poetic style, which, by the use of short lines and the anapest, heightens the effect of ecstatic devotion.

Bridle of colts untamed,  
Over our wills presiding;  
Flight of unwandering birds,  
Our flight securely guiding, — — — —<sup>75</sup>

The modern adaptation of Clement's hymn, *Shepherd of Tender Youth*, by Henry M. Dexter, 1846, while preserving in a measure the spirit of this piece, in no way reproduces the original. The Στόμιον πῶλων of Clement is representative of a theme which pervades Christian hymnody in all ages, the joy and enthusiasm of the initiate or the admonition and encouragement addressed to the Christian who stands upon the threshold of a new life. The *Odes of Solomon* have been interpreted in these terms.<sup>76</sup> Again, the theme is preserved in the so-called Amherst papyrus, which consists of a hymn of twenty-five tripartite lines, a catechism or liturgy for the newly baptized. Originating in the third century, it appears in fragmentary form but sufficiently complete to make clear its language and purport, as illustrated in the following:<sup>77</sup>

That thou mayest receive life eternal  
Thou hast escaped the hard law of the unjust . . .

Seek to live with the saints, seek to receive life,  
Seek to escape the fire.  
Hold the hope that thou hast learnt. The day that  
the master has appointed for thee is known to no man.

Tell the glad tidings unto children saying: the poor  
have received the kingdom, the children are the inheritors.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Poetical translation from *Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh, Clark, 1867), IV, 343, by William Wilson. A familiar poetical translation is found in B. Pick, *Hymns and Poetry of the Eastern Church* (New York, Eaton & Mains, 1908), 21.

<sup>76</sup> Harris & Mingana, *op. cit.* (see note 66), 187.

<sup>77</sup> B. F. Grenfell & A. S. Hunt, *Amherst Papyri* (London, Frowde, 1900-1901), 23; Leclercq, *op. cit.* (see note 1), 2853f.

<sup>78</sup> Translation from P. D. Scott-Moncrieff, *Paganism and Christianity* (Cambridge, Un. Press, 1913), 83-84.

The Amherst papyrus is a part of the new store of knowledge from antiquity which has been opened up within recent years by the discovery and study of papyri. This branch of archæology and palæography has made available new fields of research in the study of early Christianity hitherto unfamiliar. In 1920, among the Oxyrhynchus papyri was discovered a fragment of a Christian hymn. It appears on the back of a strip which records a grain account of the first half of the third century. The hymn has a musical setting, the earliest example of Christian church music extant. The fragment consists of the conclusion only, so that the length and subject matter of the hymn as a whole are unknown. Creation is enjoined to praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost, in the form of a doxology. The meter is anapestic and purely quantitative.<sup>79</sup>

The *Hymn of Thekla*, Ἄνωθεν παρθένου, appears in the *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, a work of Methodius, Bishop of Olympus and Patara in Lydia, who was martyred at Chalcis in 312. It is a hymn of twenty-four stanzas sung by Thekla, each followed by a refrain sung by the chorus,

I keep myself pure for Thee, O Bridegroom, and holding a lighted torch I go to meet Thee.<sup>80</sup>

Once more, a traditional theme in Christian hymnody is set forth, familiar from biblical as well as classical connotations and perpetuated either in the praise of virginity or in the form of the mystic union of Christ and the Church.

It is customary in presenting the subject of Greek hymn writers to pass from Clement of Alexandria to Gregory of Nazianzus and Synesius of Cyrene, poets of the fourth century who mark the beginning of a new era beyond the limits of this study. They are mentioned here only as a reminder of the long succession of great poets who created and maintained Greek hymnody throughout the ancient and medieval centuries.

Contemporary with the development of Greek hymns, the literature of the Church was moving toward its destination in Latin culture. As Latin became a liturgical language the service hymns, already cited, appeared in their Latin form. Perhaps this is one reason why the production of original Latin hymns was so long postponed. It was not until the

<sup>79</sup> B. F. Grenfell & A. S. Hunt, *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Pt. XV (London, Oxford Un. Press, 1922), no. 1786, 21-22; also Preface.

<sup>80</sup> Συμπόσιον τῶν δέκα παρθένων, xi, 2; Migne (PG), XVIII, 207-214; Translation from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VI, 351.

middle of the fourth century that the hymns of Hilary of Poitiers, the first Latin hymn writer, appeared. His authentic hymns are three in number:

O Thou who dost exist before time

is a hymn of seventy verses in honor of the Trinity,

The Incarnate Word hath deceived thee, (Death)

an Easter hymn, and

In the person of the Heavenly Adam,

a hymn on the theme of the temptation of Jesus.<sup>81</sup> Hilary, like his Greek contemporaries, stands at the beginning of a new era, but it was Ambrose, and not he, who inaugurated the tradition of the medieval Latin hymn.

So far no mention has been made of the fact that the early period of Christian history was characterized by persecution. As a rule sporadic and intermittent, it was periodically severe. At all times Christians, if not actually persecuted, were objects of suspicion to the Roman government. We owe to the official zeal of Pliny the Younger, who was a proconsul in Bithynia in 112, our first glimpse of Christian worship from the point of view of the outsider. In a letter to the Emperor Trajan on the subject of the Christians, he says that, as a part of their service at sunrise, they chanted a hymn, antiphonally, to Christ as a God.<sup>82</sup> Speculation as to the identity of this hymn has never ceased among students. Leclercq summarizes the theories as follows: It is a morning hymn later attributed to Hilary. It is the morning hymn of the Greek liturgy. It is the morning hymn of the *Apostolic Constitutions*. It is the Great Doxology.<sup>83</sup> Since they are all unsatisfactory as identifications, we remain in ignorance on this point. A recent study of Pliny's letter by Casper J. Kraemer, a classicist, proposes the translation of the words *carmen dicere*, "to chant a psalm."<sup>84</sup> This most interesting suggestion is in thorough harmony with our knowledge of the continuity of the use of the psalms in public worship at this time.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Reviewing the total pagan influence, both Greek and Latin, upon Christian hymnody, it must be understood that,

<sup>81</sup> W. N. Myers, *The Hymns of Saint Hilary of Poitiers in the Codex Aretinus* (Philadelphia, Un. of Penn., 1928), 12, 29, 53, 67. For a discussion of other hymns attributed to Hilary see *supra*, p. 14 and A. S. Walpole, *Early Latin Hymns* (Cambridge, Un. Press, 1922), 1-4.

<sup>82</sup> *Epistulae*, x, 96.

<sup>83</sup> Leclercq, *op. cit.* (see note 1), 2837-2838.

<sup>84</sup> C. J. Kraemer, "Pliny and the Early Church Worship," *Classical Philology* 29 (1934), 293-300.

in comparison with Semitic pressure in its wider implication, as well as the strictly Hebraic, pagan influence was relatively slight. It was a matter of centuries before the Hebrew psalms were permitted any rivals whatever in the usage of worship, except other biblical citations or such poems as might be produced by unquestioned churchmen. Even these were sparingly used, for *psalmi idiotici*, as the novel and original compositions were called, were forbidden by the Church and a new hymnody was thus stifled at its very birth. In a period of confusion marked by the rival use of hymns on the part of the orthodox and non-orthodox, it was felt that worship must be safeguarded. Only after the appearance of the modern vernacular languages in Europe in the period of the ninth century, when the liturgy had been set apart in the Latin tongue, was any real freedom permitted in the composition of new hymns. By that time the clergy were the poets and Latin their chosen medium of expression.<sup>85</sup>

By the time of Ambrose in the fourth century, however, Greek and oriental elements had long since merged in other aspects of civilization and, in the course of time, Christian hymns felt the effect of a universal development. There was a certain departure from biblical models and an emancipation from the old poetic forms in favor of the trend toward accent and rhyme. After all, a new religion had come into existence which demanded an authentic expression of a spiritual aspiration beyond that of the Old Testament models, just as Isaac Watts in the eighteenth century turned from the tradition of psalmody to an original presentment of the new revelation in Christ.

Are we to suppose that the Christians in the Mediterranean world of the first three centuries, representing the average inhabitant of these lands, had no hymns except those cited above? Or others like them? If they had, we are unacquainted with them. It is fair to assume that secular poetry and music eventually exerted an influence upon hymnody. At least the beginning of such influence was apparent in the adoption of popular meters by heretical poets, as well as by the orthodox.<sup>86</sup> Later, Ambrose perpetuated aspects of popular verse and perhaps music as well.<sup>87</sup> But there is no evidence at hand to support the assumption of a

<sup>85</sup> H. F. Muller, "Pre-History of the Mediaeval Drama," *Zeitschrift f. romanische Philologie* 44 (1924), 544-575.

<sup>86</sup> J. Kroll, *op. cit.* (see note 3), 273-274.

<sup>87</sup> E. Norden, "Die Literatur," in *Vom Altertum zur Gegenwart* (Leipzig, Teubner, 1921), 41-49.

popular hymnody enjoyed either in connection with worship or independently of it.

The problem of music is outside the province of this paper but is involved in any serious study of hymnology at any period of its development. Here the student is almost totally at a loss for manuscript evidence bearing musical notation from the primitive period. The Oxyrhynchus hymn is a solitary example.<sup>88</sup> This does not mean that the subject is altogether obscure. Many statements about Christian practice, inspired by biblical precedent, are found in patristic literature. The traditions both of Hebrew music and of the early Church are well known. It seems clear that melody only was employed and that it was, for the most part, unaccompanied. Instrumentation was opposed and forbidden in public worship of a liturgical nature.<sup>89</sup>

No student can leave the consideration of early Christian hymnology without a sense of defeat. The past cannot be forced to yield the hidden knowledge of which it is the custodian. Sources are very scanty, especially in proportion to other literary remains of early Christianity. Specifically, there is no collection of hymns in existence which might correspond to a modern hymnary. On the contrary, isolated examples or groups appear from place to place and from time to time in varied forms. But in one respect our evidence is sure, if not complete. Springing from the culture and the vicissitudes of the age, Christian hymns of the early Church, as in every other stage of its development, not only express the spiritual aspiration of the time but also respond to the challenge of a new day.

<sup>88</sup> Grenfell & Hunt, *op. cit.* (see note 79), 22. There are 8 recognizable notes in the Diatonic Hypolydian key of Alypius. The mode is Hypophrygian or Iastian.

<sup>89</sup> J. Quasten, *Musik und Gesang in den Kulturen der heidnischen Antike und christlichen Frühzeit* (Münster im W., Aschendorff, 1930), ch. iv.